

COUNTERPOINT / CHRISTOPHER CLEAVER

Gap will protect land, not destroy it

You missed the mark in your Oct. 5 editorial, "Land swap — Nature would get short shrift in transfer of Stony Creek land," which gave your opinion about the proposed land exchange to create a buffer and safety zone along Fort Indiantown Gap's north border.

The exchange would involve the National Guard purchasing land around DeHart Reservoir, owned by the Harrisburg City Authority, and swapping this land for about 2,100 acres of land owned by the Pennsylvania Game Commission as part of State Game Lands 211.

You state, and pose the question, "We understand that live-fire training is a vital part of preparing for combat. But where do you draw the line in destroying the environment in the name of protecting the country?"

In this case, you don't have to draw any such line, because the proposed land swap will not "destroy" the environment or have negative impacts. To portray Fort Indiantown Gap's training area as a destroyed landscape is wrong. Fort Indiantown Gap offers an environmentally diverse extension to the habitat of State Game Lands 211. We are home to 36 species of mammals, 112 breeding spe-

cies of birds, 34 species of reptiles and amphibians, 25 species of fish and 792 species of plants. We have established the largest occurrence of native warm-season grass in the state, created seven miles of riparian buffers and restored acres of wetlands. The installation has numerous wildlife species of special concern, including the regal fritillary butterfly. This is due to our positive and proactive land management practices.

In response to our efforts, our environmental programs won the Governor's Award for Environmental Excellence in 2001 and the 2003 National Stewardship Award, which recognized the best National Guard environmental program in the nation.

What's more, the land we plan to obtain from the Game Commission in the exchange will look the same in the future as it does today: no roads, no development, no construction. Plus, there will be no impact to Stony Creek or the adjacent rail-trail. This land will serve only as a safety and buffer zone. We are prepared to include conservation-related conditions in the land exchange agreement to guarantee these commitments in perpetuity.

Your editorial also opined that because "the land sur-

rounding DeHart Reservoir is part of a protected watershed," its future development would be "unthinkable." This statement misses the point. While development might be ruled out, future owners could deny public access to this land.

Providing this land to the Pennsylvania Game Commission creates the largest game lands in the commonwealth and guarantees the freedom of access for present and future generations of hunters.

FREEDOM IS the part we strongly believe in. Our mission at Fort Indiantown Gap is to prepare our 20,000 Pennsylvania National Guard men and women to protect our freedoms. Today some 2,400 of our commonwealth's citizen soldiers and airmen are fighting the war against terror. We are proud of our mission: ensuring the defenders of freedom are properly trained, equipped and prepared for serving our state and nation.

The proposed State Game Lands exchange is essential to providing effective operation of future firing ranges at the Gap. The proposed land swap is environmentally sound in every way.

LT. COL. CHRIS CLEAVER is public affairs officer for the Pennsylvania National Guard.